

REVEREND R. R. MORROW, JR.

by

David C. Morrow

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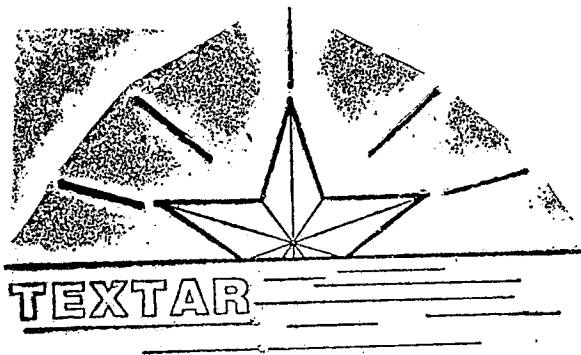
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Around 1700 my branch of the Morrow family sailed from Belfast or possibly from Liverpool for Maryland. Until the early twentieth century most of them lived in extended families and followed the farming frontier.

During and after the Revolution this branch of the Morrow clan lived in Greenville, South Carolina from whence in 1820 Thomas Morrow took children and siblings and cousins to Morgan County, Alabama. From there in 1850 the old man moved his children and many of his kin to east Texas, where he bought enough land in Anderson County for himself and each family to have a farm. There he died in 1863 at age seventy-eight.

One son, who lived from 1816 to 1900, now known as Robert Richardson Morrow, Sr., married Helen Ester Wallace in 1842, became a Baptist minister, and founded numerous churches around Palestine and Athens, Texas. Among these was the Pisgah Baptist Church at Brushy Creek in 1854, site of the Morrow family cemetery. Known respectfully as Elder Morrow and highly esteemed as a pioneer and minister, he served his parishioners on horseback, farmed cotton, and reared thirteen children.

Of his six sons who survived to adulthood, R. R. Morrow, Jr., whose middle name is usually recorded as Richard, was my great-grandfather. I've been able to recover particulars of these founding settlers' lives from interviews and public records, and an understanding of their moral dimension from the recollections of my father, who as a boy spent summers

with his grandfather in Palestine. It is this last member of a pioneer generation whose life is most personally accessible.

My great-grandfather was born on St. Patrick's Day, 1857, on his father's Anderson County farm. He would live all but a few months of his life — he at some point spent part of a year in Hood County — within a few miles of his birthplace. His early life was filled with farm chores and religious instruction.

His niece, Mrs. O. E. Henderson, who kindly furnished me details of those days, wrote me that the men in this family had little time for school and didn't learn to read "until they were almost grown." This appears to support a popular belief that our forebearers cared little for learning. In fact, though schools were often far apart or lacking and children had to work, educational standards were generally much

higher than today and those students who didn't meet them failed. Most pioneers were eager to learn.

That this is as true of Texas as elsewhere shows in a historical note from 1863 when my great-grandfather was six years old. In a report to the Cherokee Baptist Association, related in James Carroll's *History of Texas Baptists*, his father, Elder Morrow, outlined the problems caused by the War's extra demand for children to work, stressing the need to see to education whatever its outcome. What Mrs. Henderson, born Louia Alma Morrow in 1888 to William I. Morrow and his wife Charity Savilla Murphey, saw was the determination with which youths taught themselves despite impoverishment by the war effort and Reconstruction. Till then neither Texas nor the South were poor or backward, and the younger

Reverend Morrow for the rest of his life applied himself to the study of his calling.

On 6 January 1875 R. R. Morrow, Jr. married Mary Ann Ophelia Barton, born in Georgia on Halloween of 1856. A cheerful good natured lady who played jokes and could do exact imitations of other persons' voices, she went by the name Ophelia. They set up a farm at Elmwood, where they grew cotton.

They had seven children, two of whom died young: Saleta (born 1875), Elbert (1878-1881), Savannah (1882), my grandfather G. R. Morrow (1884-1952), Laura (1886-1903), Lois (1889), and Harvey B. (1891). Children's deaths were one of our ancestors' expected trials, and one of the ways their lives differed from ours. Only in the last half century has it given way to the expectation all children would survive.

About the time he married, God as they expressed it, called my great-grandfather and his brother James M. Pendleton Morrow to the ministry. His career lasted more than fifty years and, following his father's path, he was pastor of rural churches at Elkhart, Judson, Pisgah, and elsewhere in Anderson, Henderson, and Smith counties. He founded Baptist churches in Frankston and LaRue, Texas, such may also have been his mission in Hood County, and he was a member of Saline Baptist Association. His obituary proudly credits him with having baptized Rev. Billy White, well know pastor of the First Baptist Church in Oklahoma City during the 1930s.

According to Mrs. Henderson, her uncles "preached the Bible, and they did not leave out the part about hell, either..." Today they would be called Fundamentalists, a term scarcely suitable since

nothing they encountered caused them the doubts that were already making many people defend rather than live their faiths. Today's popular cynical outlook often implies that preaching stern morality serves to frighten parishioners into paying for salvation. Certainly there are evangelists who intend this and no doubt there were then, but these men weren't among them.

Few in their world were cynics, though they could be skeptical of impractical or unproved notions and distrustful of individuals who merited it. Their stand was based not on cruelty or greed, but genuine concern for their people. They believed firmly in the physical actuality of hell; they didn't see it as a state of mind but as a geographical place as real as Washington D. C. and they were responsible for making sure people didn't go there. I don't know what my great-grandfather earned, but his brother J. M. P. made

\$ 5.00 per Sunday at the First Baptist Church in Palestine. Country churches must have paid less, often only in kind, and sometimes nothing.

Not only did R. R. Morrow live his principles to the point of opposing alcohol and tobacco, but he devoted himself to learning as much as he could about his own and other religions. The Reverend had a number of bibles and scholarly studies of the Bible and Christianity as well as cross referenced concordances and works on doctrine. People consulted him on points of faith and ethics.

Mr. Orrin Ray, a friend who raised dogs, came to him once with an oddly quaint question. Someone had told him the Bible deemed selling dogs a sin. Specifically, by "dogs" was understood "bitches" and "sluts," which were and are acceptable specialized terms for female dogs. The Reverend explained that the

biblical injunction was against prostitution. When a later commentator had elaborated on that law, "harlot" and "prostitute" were considered such distasteful terms that the canine references became euphemisms for them. As to whether that someone was just pulling Mr. Ray's leg no information has come down to me.

A staunch supporter of Grover Cleveland, the Reverend named my grandfather Grover Richard Morrow after his favorite candidate. President Cleveland, however, was involved in a scandal quite like President Clinton's, stashing his girlfriend in the White House. When this was revealed, the Reverend immediately changed his son's first name to Gilbert, easily done since his children had no birth certificates. This may explain why my grandfather went by the moniker "Bud."

A succinct lesson in the Reverend's frontier values is in my father's recollection from one of the summers he spent in Palestine. He got into a fight with another boy and his mother pulled them apart. She was about to punish him when the elderly minister asked why he'd been fighting.

"I had to."

"Did you win?" asked the minister.

That was the story's point. It doesn't seem either boy won since my grandmother stopped them, but what the Reverend thought mattered was to be sure you are right and try your best. So basic an approach is not overly simple and violent despite current detractors and it doesn't leave people befuddled by doubt in emergencies.

The Reverend's daughter Savannah was raped by a boy named Haeston Davis. Savannah

told her mother and a girl cousin but not her father. The women never told the Reverend what Davis had done because they were terrified he would kill the boy. Thus they could never tell the authorities, either. Savannah never told anyone else except her fiancée, a man named John Buckhalter Howard, whom she married in 1913. Of course, her female relatives knew about it and were able to recount the incident to me sixty or so years later. Perhaps it helps account for Savannah helping a cousin who "had to run away from home to get married;" Savannah loaned the girl some clothes... "just a print dress to get married in" wrote Mrs. Henderson. Women are often credited with having a civilizing influence as frontier conditions lessened, yet in this instance theirs seems a contradictory influence. Essentially, a rape victim's female relatives were protecting her attacker out of fear he'd be punished, the beginning of those

ambiguities that have brought us so far from simple virtues.

There are likely reasons for them to believe he would have killed Davis, but maybe the Reverend wasn't as mercilessly rigid as his womenfolk feared. In 1900 Saleta, a willful and "high tempered" girl, was stood up by Silas Rogers. Although at first it was against her parents' wishes, she quickly married Ellis Willbanks. Perhaps her father found her impulsiveness questionable and he performed their ceremony even though Saleta had become bedridden with typhoid fever. She recovered and the couple moved to Tyler, Texas.

A version of this related that Saleta had been disowned for having an illegitimate child. I was never able to get any confirmation, though after she married and moved to Tyler "everyone lost contact with

her,” meaning her sisters and cousins. She had four or five children, two of whom were buried at Brushy Creek; that fact shows they didn’t entirely lose contact. She may have separated from her husband and continued to live in Tyler.

The Reverend was not a simple man. When, late in life, he received a telegram informing him that his brother John had died at the age of eighty-eight the Reverend said, “I told him smokin’ would kill him.” My father, who told me the story, seemed to think he was completely serious. Maybe not. Utterly devoid of religious doubt, the Reverend was also devoid of fear or such indulgences as “existential angst.” Maybe he was being quietly facetious about his own mere mortal certainty and his fifteen year old grandson missed the real joke.

Most of us would consider the Reverend a bigot, and it would be false to represent a man born in 1857 as having the attitudes of one born in 1957. It would be equally false to simply overlook the differences. His conviction that Protestantism was the only valid Christianity, for example, isn't just a personal quirk; the Morrows and related clans brought that uncompromising stance from the religious strife they fled in Ulster. Even so, the Reverend, a man who carefully studied religion, once admitted that "the Catholics have some good points." What he thought those points were, alas, I never learned.

His lifetime was marked by the legal institutionalization of racism. Black people were made the scapegoats by both sides in a struggle between two interpretations of government, a still ongoing conflict. This conflict itself must be what largely shaped the

Reverend's opinions since no traditions or records show his family as slaveholders. The 1840 Census of Morgan County Alabama, for example, shows no slaves in Elder Morrow's family. On the other hand, carefully closed between the pages of our great-grandfather's family Bible my cousin Ken Morrow found a Confederate \$ 2 bill.

Relations between black and white were more complicated and multilayered than recent generations of either race realize. People built friendships and worked together around and through formalities of caste, dimensions now accessible only in the works of the great novelists of that time. The Reverend did not live to see new conditions erase the personal relationships and leave only the formal evil. He did not live to see people identify his virtues with his bigotry and reject both.

A story was told to me that shows the great gulf between the acceptable racial outlooks of 1900 and of 2000. The Reverend sometimes preached and performed various services for black churches, though he disliked it. Once at Brushy Creek he was baptizing "colored people" on a platform build out over the water. An enthusiastic participant who shouted and waved his arms at each consecration fell into the stream and came up under the platform. Everyone simply stood there as he thrashed about beneath them until the Reverend dragged the parishioner out by his clothing and held him upside down till his lungs emptied. Coming to, the man declared, "Uncle Dick, if dese here goin's on keep up we're gonna lose a damn fine niggah!" and fled, never to be seen again. The Reverend and his contemporaries found this story highly amusing. Today it seems pointless.

Ophelia died on 20 August 1905. If her outgoing nature vis-à-vis the Reverend's quiet self-control shows that opposites attract, his second marriage showed the same principle through wholly different contrasts. On 7 November 1906 he married Miss Nannie L. Harding at the First Methodist Church in Frankston. According to their agreement, she would attend the Baptist church and he would not mention his first wife.

By all accounts, she was a difficult person. In a colorful turn of phrase, Mrs. Henderson wrote that "Aunt Nancy, Uncle Dick's second wife, was the devil's step-mother." My elderly cousin was certain that the second Mrs. Morrow was so difficult because she was a "ripe old maid." After all, she was thirty years old before she married! Nancy was jealous of Ophelia and didn't even want to share the Reverend

with his children, of whom three were still living at home.

Small incidents could set her off. An example is one Sunday when the couple went out and Harvey Morrow was at the Henderson's. Savannah and Lois decided to fix dinner, so Savannah killed and prepared a chicken. When their father and step-mother returned the latter hit the ceiling because it was *her* chicken, not her husband's, and the girls hadn't asked permission. They called Harvey, who had to go help straighten things out.

Matters supposedly came to a head at a family gathering. Whenever the couple visited the Morrow cemetery, Nancy would virtually dare the Reverend to look in the direction of Ophelia's grave. There was a family custom of holding homecomings at the church that Elder Morrow had founded, which

always concluded with the family passing through the cemetery singing hymns. From this the couple turned aside on a particular occasion whose significance is now forgotten. Lois Morrow was reduced to tears. Mr. Ray, a candidate for sheriff at the time, was present and afterwards gave the Reverend's wife a piece of his mind. According to him she straightened up and behaved after that, which Mrs. Henderson also said.

I met Mr. Ray, the only non-relative I knew who knew the Reverend well, when I was about ten and again a few years later in 1965, when he told his version of that incident. He gave me a lasting impression of the Reverend's people. My father always called him Mr. Ray both out of respect and because he had a brother, my oldest uncle, who was called Ray. In his country store across the road from a fragrant stand of pine, Mr. Ray opened us a couple of "sody waters"

and sat down with a coffee can spittoon. He had wire glasses and white hair and an open face, youthfully unlined although he was past eighty years old. He spoke plainly, with an air of total conviction, and now and then, with a penetratingly shrewd look in his eyes gave a deft observation that summed up the essence of a subject.

An unintentional insight into the ways of his generation came when I got up and left for a moment, upon which he leaned over to my father and asked, "Y'all ain't had no nigger problems down there [in Corpus Christi] have you?"

By 1910 the Reverend had sold his farm and bought a house in town at 1517 North Link Street where the couple remained for the rest of their lives. In April 1903 Laura had died of a chronic sinus infection that had often kept her in pain and caused her

to bleed from the ears. In 1905 my grandfather had married Gracie Evans, and the couple was to spend most of their lives in Electra, Texas. Lois married Willis Tippin, Cherokee County sheriff. Harvey married and began his career as a prison guard. The couple were now known generally as "Uncle Dick" and "Aunt Nancy" even in the local newspaper, and their home was often visited by children and their children. Although he kept in contact with most of his kin, the Reverend's life marked the end of the extended family system and farming lifestyle through which Morrow pioneers had for over two hundred years developed new lands.

He still served his calling and never compromised his principles. The railroad, which reached Palestine around the turn of the century, was supposed to be the cause of a shady district growing up

in town. He and his friend, Dr. Edmund B. Parsons, chief surgeon of the Missouri Pacific Railroad, often went there to help people. Once a man who saw the doctor there without noticing the minister encountered the Reverend driving his buggy downtown. This man mentioned he'd seen Dr. Parsons at a place of questionable repute, with the implication his business had been other than medical.

The Reverend reached for his buggy whip and sat slapping in into one palm as he said, "I ain't never been a man of violence, but I'm about to commence." The man quickly apologized and left — without, apparently, accounting for what *he'd* been doing there.

Rev. Morrow supported himself in his old age. He kept one hundred seventy-five beehives and regularly sold fifty-five gallon barrels of honey to the

Burleson Honey Company. He was never stung, although the bees once attacked my father and killed a bulldog belonging to Mr. Ray, who did manage to save its puppies. The Reverend also made a salve he sold as a cure-all for a quarter a can. He prepared this in his back yard, a process that took all afternoon. The ingredients are forgotten but a clue might lie in the bee attack on his grandson. Aunt Nancy applied a paste of soda to the stings, my father slept about eighteen hours, and awoke completely healed. The Reverend supplied Dr. Parsons with the salve, but whether he used it or not nobody knows. To a man doubtful as to whether it would help him the Reverend said, "Well, take it and if it works send me two bits."

Rev. Morrow did not buy or even drive a car. During the 1920s and 1930s, he still hitched his team and drove his buggy along North Link or

Sycamore Street whenever he had business downtown. The roads were paved lanes or brick streets originally designed for horses, not the multilane highways we have today, but still he often obstructed traffic and he ignored traffic signals. His reaction to anyone honking more than once was to yell "I heard you the first time!" According to local historian Mrs. J. F. Neel, even before he died his famous buggy was used in high school activities and local parades, for which it was picked up at Mr. Ray's store.

This odd bit of conservatism was a personal preference, since many people his age took to cars. It may have been a shrewdly economical measure like the bees and the medicine; the Reverend lost nothing in the Great Depression despite his advanced age. His widow was able to sell the house and many of

their things and live out her days with her niece in Houston.

Dr. Parsons retired to Houston, the two friends having made a promise that when one died the other would attend his funeral. By early 1938 the Reverend had suffered two heart attacks, but when he received a telegram that Dr. Parsons had died he said he was going to attend the funeral. Friends and family protested that he was too sick.

Mr. Ray told him, "You're not in any shape to go. If Dr. Parsons were here he'd tell you not to."

The Reverend replied, "I said I'd go and I'm goin' to."

The weather deteriorated, and in a cold rain the Reverend boarded a train for Houston and attended the funeral. He returned feeling poorly and his

condition worsened, though in memory of the doctor he planted an acorn on the lawn of the Missouri Pacific Hospital. He took to his bed, diagnosed with pneumonia. At 11:10 A.M. on a Tuesday, five days later and three days before his eighty-first birthday in March 1938, the Reverend died. It is easy to criticize his dangerous determination to keep his word, but he knew the medical science of sixty years ago could do nothing for his heart and he was not the least bit afraid.

The Reverend's funeral was held on 23 March to give his children and siblings time to come home: Harvey from Angleton, "Bud" from Electra, Savannah from "near Palestine" (per the *Daily Herald*), Saleta from Tyler, Lois from Frankston, J. M. P. from Amarillo, Mrs. Sallie Bailey from Athens, Mrs. Lula Brown from Brushy Creek, their families, and friends. He lies in the family cemetery at Brushy Creek.

Nancy Morrow stayed a while in Houston and then returned to Palestine. She and her niece stayed in the house, but, claiming to be afraid to spend the night there, would walk a mile and a half to stay with Mrs. Henderson. The latter found that she was actually interested in an elderly neighbor, a former railroad engineer who was a "senile patient" whose daughters worked during the day. Mrs. Henderson "led her out " of the retiree's house by the hand one day. Presumably Nancy and her niece returned to Houston afterwards.

Of our family, who pioneered Anderson County, Texas, Mrs. Henderson wrote that they "mostly made this country...all told they were a wonderful family, I don't know of a single one that ever [went] to the penitentiary or was in any serious trouble." She might have added that they passed on to

us an understanding of those values that have stood the
test of time.

INDEX

- Alabama: 1, 15.
 Amarillo, Texas: 26.
 American Revolution: 1.
 Anderson County, Texas: 1,3,6,27.
 Angleton, Texas: 26.
 Athens, Texas: 2,26.

 Baptist Church: 2,4,6,8,17.
 Bailey, Mrs. Sallie: 26.
 Barton, Mary Ann Ophelia [Morrow]
 birth: 5.
 character: 5.
 daughter raped: 10.
 death: 17.
 keeps secret of rape: 11.
 marries R. R. Morrow, Jr.: 5.
 Rev.'s second wife jealous of: 18.
 Bees: 22, 23, 24.
 Belfast, Northern Ireland: 1.
 Brown, Mrs. Lula: 26.
 Brushy Creek, Texas: 2, 13, 16, 26.
 Burleson Honey Company: 23.

 Carroll, James: 4.
 Catholics: 14.
 Cherokee Baptist Association: 4.

Cherokee County, Texas: 21.

Christianity: 8, 14.

Civil War: 4.

Cleveland, Grover: 9.

Clinton, Bill: 9.

Daily Herald [Palestine, Texas]: 26.

Davis, Haeston: 10, 11, 12.

Dogs: 8, 21, 23.

East Texas: 1.

Elder Morrow [R. R. Morrow, Sr.]: 2, 4, 15, 18.

Electra, Texas: 21, 26.

Elkhart, Texas: 6.

Elmwood, Texas: 5.

Evans, Gracie Adah [Morrow]: 10, 21.

First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City: 6.

First Baptist Church of Palestine: 8.

First Methodist Church of Frankston: 17.

Frankston, Texas: 6, 17, 26.

Georgia: 5.

Great Depression: 24.

Greenville, South Carolina: 1.

Halloween: 5.

Harding, Nancy L. [Morrow]

“Aunt Nancy:” 21.

character of: 17.

conduct in cemetery: 18.

enraged over chicken: 18.

jealous of Ophelia: 18.

in Houston with niece: 27.

interested in senile pensioner: 27.
 marries R. R. Morrow, Jr.: 17.
 medical skills: 23.
 Mr. Ray straightens her out: 19.
 sells house: 24.

Henderson County, Texas: 6.
 Henderson, Mrs. O. E.: 3, 4, 6, 11, 17, 18, 19, 27.
History of Texas Baptists: 4.
 Hood County, Texas: 3, 6.
 Houston, Texas: 25, 27.
 Howard, John Buckhalter: 11.

Judson, Texas: 6.

LaRue, Texas: 6.
 Liverpool, England: 1.

Maryland: 1.
 Missouri Pacific Hospital: 26.
 Missouri Pacific Railroad: 22.
 Morgan County, Alabama: 1, 15.
 Morrow, Charity Savilla Murphey: 4.
 Morrow, Elbert: 5.
 Morrow, Elder [R. R. Morrow, Sr.]: 2, 4, 15, 18.
 Morrow family: 1, 3, 15, 18, 21, 25, 27.
 Morrow Family Cemetery: 2, 19, 26.
 Morrow, Gilbert Richard: 5,
 at funeral: 26.
 "Bud.:" 9, 26.
 in Electra, Texas: 20, 26.
 marries: 20.
 name changed from Grover: 9.
 Morrow, Gracie Adah Evans: 10, 21.
 Morrow. Harvey Barton: 5,

- at funeral: 26.
- marries: 21.
- prison guard: 21.
- smoothes out chicken argument: 18.
- Morrow, Harvey Carl: 2, 10, 13, 19, 22, 23, 27.
- Morrow, Helen E. Wallace: 2.
- Morrow, James M. Pendleton: 6, 7, 26.
- Morrow, John Bird: 13.
- Morrow, Ken: 15.
- Morrow, Laura: 5, 20.
- Morrow, Lois: 5.
 - at funeral: 26.
 - chicken incident: 18.
 - marries: 21.
 - stepmother reduces to tears: 19.
- Morrow, Mary Ann Ophelia Barton: 5, 10, 11, 17, 18.
- Morrow, Nancy L. Harding: 17, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 27.
- Morrow, Richard Ray: 19.
- Morrow, Rev. Robert Richard [Richardson] Jr.
 - against alcohol and tobacco: 8, 13.
 - and Great Depression: 24.
 - answers Mr. Ray's biblical question: 8.
 - as racist: 14.
 - attends Dr. Parsons' funeral sick: 25.
 - baptizes black people: 16.
 - birth: 3.
 - buggy used in parades: 24.
 - called to ministry: 6.
 - changes son's name: 9.
 - children: 5.
 - death: 26.
 - education: 3.
 - farm boy: 3.
 - fundamentalist: 6.

funeral: 26.
 humor: 13.
 kept bees: 22.
 lacked fear: 13.
 marries daughter to Willbanks: 12.
 marries Nancy Harding: 17.
 marries Ophelia Barton: 5.
 medicinal salve: 23.
 middle name: 2.
 ministers to red light district: 22.
 moves to town: 20.
 opinion of Catholics: 14.
 questions grandson about fight: 10.
 refuses to drive a car: 24.
 saves black man: 16.
 scene at cemetery: 18.
 threatens to horsewhip man: 22.
 "Uncle Dick:" 16, 17, 21.
 women afraid he'll kill rapist: 11.

Morrow, Rev. Robert Richardson, Sr.: 2, 4, 15, 18.

Morrow, Saleta: 5.

at funeral: 26.
 children: 13.
 married: 12.
 separated: 13.
 stood up: 12.
 supposed disinheritance: 12.
 typhoid fever: 12.

Morrow, Savannah: 5.

argument over chicken: 18.
 at funeral: 26.
 helps cousin elope: 11.
 married: 11.
 raped: 10.

Morrow, Thomas: 1.
 Morrow, William I.: 4.
 Murphey, Charity Savilla [Morrow]: 4.

Neel, Mrs. J. F.: 24.
 North Link Street [Palestine, Texas]: 20, 23.

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: 6.

Palestine, Texas: 2, 3, 8, 10, 21, 26, 27.

Parsons, Dr. Edmund B.:

chief Missouri Pacific surgeon: 22.
 death: 25.
 funeral: 25.
 given Rev. Morrow's medicine: 23.
 reputation insulted: 22.
 retires: 25.

Pisgah Baptist Church: 2, 6.

Pisgah, Texas: 6.

Protestantism: 14.

Racism: 14, 15.

Ray, Orrin:

advises Rev. against attending funeral:
 22.
 buggy kept at his store: 24.
 duped over biblical question: 8.
 portrait of: 19.
 saves puppies from bees: 23.
 sheriff candidate: 19.
 straightens out Nancy Morrow: 19.

Reconstruction: 4.

Rogers, Silas: 12.

St. Patrick's Day: 3.
Saline Baptist Association: 6.
Slaves lacking in family: 15.
Smith County, Texas: 6.
South: 4.
South Carolina: 1.
Sycamore Street [Palestine, Texas]: 23.

Tippin, Willis: 21.
Tyler, Texas: 12, 13, 26.

Ulster: 14.

Wallace, Helen Ester [Morrow]: 2.
Washington, D. C.: 7.
White House: 9.
White, Rev. Billy: 6.
Willbanks, Ellis: 12.